

Fish Story

by Kevin C. McHugh

Poetry is no sport for the faint of heart.
 You get your fingers slimy rooting through the bucket
 for the ripe word and fix it squirming to the leadered barb—
 the lure of live bait!

Cast the weighted line away and out, out over the waters
 and watch as it seems to linger for one suspended breath—
 then plunges into the dark to plumb the depths beneath the boat,
 the blur of fine nylon line spinning softly from the reel.

Be mindful of the backlash, the knotted tangle of thoughts
 that must be unraveled or, sometimes, in anger or frustration,
 cut like the Gordian knot and discarded, the fishing put off—
 for a better day.

Somewhere, beneath the reflecting waves,
 the big one waits, the prize poem, swimming
 in the thermocline where the tempered layers meet,
 beyond time, plying the interplay of hot and cold.

There it prowls the undercurrents of past and present
 to strike in an instant as fleeting as a silvered fin
 but, mostly, to live suspended in those polarities like something
 caught in the spinning of opposed magnetic fields.

Feel the nibbles, teasing to the fingered touch of filament,
 followed by the still-born labor of a line at once too light
 or in the premature retrieval of the empty reeling in.
 But be patient and still as the ageless undersea.

Because sometime, maybe once in your lifetime
 or once upon a time, you may tackle that big one.
 And it may rise like a coelacanth from the unsounded depths,
 fighting you and resisting to the last your net.

Do not be surprised if you, too, fearing the catch,
 dread the gaff and the floundering iridescent spasms,
 the gleaming of the killing surface light
 and the fading in the suffocation of the breathing world.

If you let it lie there upon the splintered deck
 to gasp its last—it will be smaller
 than when you wrestled it up from memory.
 And so you will let it go.

It's then that you join the timeless club and,
 played out upon your return to shoreline boundaries,
 say, "*You should have seen the one that got away!*"